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Nicaraguan Rebels Increase Pace of Sabotage Attacks

Commando Units Trained by CIA and Green Berets

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MANAGUA, Nicaragua, April 2—Anti-Sandinista rebels, using intelligence data provided by the CIA, have stepped up the pace and precision of their sabotage attacks in the past two months, according to Nicaraguan authorities and U.S. officials in Central America and Washington.

Recent attacks, which knocked down telephone poles and electric power line pylons, signaled the opening of an intense campaign planned for April and May in which sabotage of fixed installations will become one of the rebels' chief tactics against the Sandinista government, U.S. officials said.

"The Sandinistas are extremely vulnerable to this type of commando operation," said one U.S. official in a Central American country. "In the next two months you will see that vulnerability tested to the maximum."

The rebels, known as counterrevolutionaries or contras, face an uphill struggle to inflict significant losses on the leftist Nicaraguan government by the time Congress considers a new \$105 million aid package in the fall.

Contra commando squads have been trained by Green Berets and the CIA to close in on targets, set charges and get away undetected. Several units armed with C4 explosive have parachuted deep into Nicaragua, dropped from resupply flights that originated in Honduras, U.S. officials and contra leaders said.

The CIA is selecting targets using old infrastructure maps of Nicaragua drawn years ago by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers recently unearthed in Washington. The maps indicate which power stations and overhead cables can disable larger grids, if they are hit.

The string of sabotage began Feb. 16 when contra sappers blasted a power station near the town of La Trinidad, blacking out three northern provinces for four days.

In the last two weeks of March, contra saboteurs struck 10 times along the length of Nicaragua's heavily populated Pacific coast, toppling electric towers and putting out lights in towns on Nicaragua's northern and southern borders.

On March 16 a daring commando group hit a high-tension tower on the outskirts of the heavily policed capital, but it did not fall.

Lt. Col. Roberto Calderon, Army commander of a vast southeastern region extending to the Atlantic Coast, reported 14 attacks on overhead cables in his area in the first three months of this year.

In all of 1986, only two pylons were destroyed by contras, the electric company said.

In coming weeks the contras' strikes will become more visible and damaging, U.S. officials said.

possible target is the fuel-supply network, including an Exxon pipeline that stretches from a refinery in Managua to Puerto Sandino, about 50 miles northwest.

Contra leaders said in January they did not plan to strike the refinery in the near future. The Esso plant, part of an Exxon subsidiary, processes about 12,000 barrels a day of Soviet-supplied crude. It is Nicaragua's only refinery.

"God forbid," exclaimed Exxon spokeswoman Sarah Johnson, when questioned, by telephone, at the corporation's New York headquarters about attacks on the pipeline. "We certainly hope there

won't be any, but we obviously don't have any way to control it."

Sandinista officers said they cannot protect the whole pipeline. But oil experts said it is relatively easy to repair.

Contra attacks in October 1983 set ablaze several 10,000-barrel Esso fuel storage tanks in the northwestern port of Corinto. Esso repaired the tanks, and did not make public the amount of its losses. But on Dec. 1, 1986, the weakened bottom of one repaired tank ripped away from its walls. More than 9,000 barrels of highly flammable aviation fuel gushed out, forcing the evacuation of 150 Corinto families.

Another possibility, considered in meetings of the interagency group that meets in Washington to oversee contra policy, is an attack to free prisoners from one of several hidden jails in provincial towns where the Sandinista security police hold suspects.

Nicaraguans released from such jails have said the police kept them in tiny cells and deprived them of food and sleep.

Sandinista military commanders acknowledged that they have little defense against attacks on isolated telephone poles and electric lines. In urban areas the government has mobilized nighttime citizens' patrols in hopes of scaring off saboteurs.

A new Sandinista media campaign portrays the sabotage as a last resort by contras, who lack the strength to go after military positions, damaging the civilian population, not the government.

After contras darkened the northern border town of Ocotal March 26, Sandinista television news reports showed somber pictures of the hospital there, with plasma supplies turning brown and patients gasping in stifling heat when the air-conditioning went off.